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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 000634

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: EREZ CLOSES FOLLOWING ARMED ATTACK

Classified By: DCM Gene A. Cretz, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: Israeli officials closed the Erez crossing for an indefinite period following an assault by armed Palestinian gunmen in the early hours of February 9. Israeli soldiers killed the attackers. There were no Israeli casualties. An MOD official said that, during the period of Karni's recent closure, officials had discovered a pipe that terrorists had penetrated near the crossing. End summary.

EREZ ATTACKED

2. (C) Erez crossing was closed February 9 following an early morning assault by armed Palestinian gunmen. MOD Coordination and Liaison Administration Foreign Relations and International Organizations Department Chief Major Uri Singer told econoff that the two men, firing AK-47s and lobbing grenades, attacked the checkpoint at approximately 4:15AM local time. (Note: According to press reports, the Aksa Martyrs Brigade and the Popular Resistance Committees have claimed joint responsibility for the attack. End note.) Singer said the two men had come down the road from the Palestinian side and hid behind cement blocks about 30 meters from the checkpoint before they commenced firing. He said that IDF soldiers and the militants exchanged fire for thirty minutes before the attackers were shot dead. There were no Israeli casualties. Israeli soldiers found four unexploded hand grenades, eight full magazines, wire cutters, a suicide belt, and the two AK-47s when they checked the bodies, said Singer.

3. (C) Singer said the first indication of a possible incident was at 2:00AM when the number of Palestinian workers seeking to cross dwindled to zero. Peak crossing times are between 1-8AM, said Singer, and normally there would have been hundreds of pedestrians at the checkpoint at that time of night. He said a civilian security guard at the checkpoint alerted the IDF that something was afoot. Singer said that this scenario was similar to an attack on Rafah that took place on January 13, 2005. According to Singer, a search and destroy mission was ongoing (at mid-day February 9) to make sure the area was clear of any unexploded ordnance.

4. (C) Singer did not know when Erez might be reopened. He said that Erez is the only crossing point currently open for ordinary pedestrians entering Israel from Gaza. He indicated that the crossing could be open for emergency situations, but such instances would be considered on a case-by-case basis. Regarding a possible alternative, he said that Israel could offer Kerem Shalom, but indicated that might not be a viable option. Singer added that when a crossing is attacked there is no reason to open an alternative right away.

KARNI TUNNEL

5. (C) Despite press reports to the contrary, Singer said that a tunnel had been discovered at Karni crossing during the nearly three-week period it had been closed. He said that terrorists had penetrated a pipe from the storm water basin that had been funded by the World Bank. He said that, prior to construction, the GOI had asked the World Bank to install safety grids to prevent unauthorized entry. Singer did not know the width of the pipe, but offered that it is wide enough for someone to crawl through. (Note: A USAID contract security expert examined the storm drain pipe, and he did not believe it had been used by terrorists. End note.)

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JONES